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Platform Choice and Switching Across Product Categories in Digital Shopping Journeys: Evidence from International Students in China

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ABSTRACT

Digital shopping journeys increasingly span multiple platforms, yet research on how international consumers navigate platform selection and switching within a single purchase process in China remains limited. This study investigates platform usage across discovery, evaluation, and purchase stages among international students in China, focusing on product categories, switching behavior, decision factors, and digital adaptation. Using survey data, we conducted descriptive analysis, chi-square testing, and Spearman correlation analysis to examine platform patterns and adaptation-related relationships. The results show that respondents frequently combined multiple platforms throughout their shopping journeys, with different platforms preferred for different product categories and shopping stages. Although switching patterns varied across categories, product category was not significantly associated with switching behavior. Price and information were important considerations in switching decisions, while trust, authenticity, convenience, and after-sales service influenced final platform choice. Furthermore, Chinese-language ability and residence duration were positively associated with shopping confidence. This study contributes to digital commerce research by highlighting strategic multi-platform behavior and the adaptation process of international consumers in China's digital marketplace.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed retail environments, shifting consumer behavior from single-channel purchasing toward complex, multi-touchpoint shopping journeys (Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). Consumers increasingly interact with multiple digital platforms during a single purchase process, using different platforms for product discovery, information search, evaluation, comparison, and final transaction completion. This transformation has encouraged extensive research on omnichannel retailing, which emphasizes that consumers actively combine different touchpoints according to their decision needs rather than following a linear purchase path controlled by retailers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef *et al.*, 2021). Platform selection has therefore become increasingly dynamic, as consumers may prefer different platforms at different stages depending on the functions and benefits provided (Van Nguyen *et al.*, 2022).

Digital platforms are no longer simply transaction channels; they have developed into differentiated ecosystems that provide unique combinations of information resources, social interaction, convenience, trust mechanisms, and purchasing services (Hajli, 2015). Social commerce platforms may support product discovery through user-generated content, communities, and peer recommendations, whereas marketplace platforms may provide stronger functions in price comparison, product availability, payment convenience, and logistics services (Gawer, 2022). Therefore, consumers may discover products on one platform, evaluate alternatives on

another, and complete purchases through a different platform (Van Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). China provides an important research context since it has developed one of the world's most advanced and diverse digital commerce ecosystems (Kondo & Okubo, 2022; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). Consumers interact with comprehensive marketplaces such as Taobao/Tmall and JD, social commerce platforms such as Xiaohongshu/RedNote and Douyin/TikTok, and integrated digital service platforms such as WeChat and Meituan (Kondo & Okubo, 2022; Siyal *et al.*, 2021). These platforms provide different functions within consumer decision processes, creating a highly competitive and interconnected digital environment (Hajli, 2015). Within this environment, international students represent an important but relatively underexplored consumer group. Unlike domestic consumers who are familiar with local platforms and consumption practices, international students must adapt to unfamiliar digital shopping systems, including local platforms, payment methods, language environments, and seller communication processes (Kondo & Okubo, 2022; Siyal *et al.*, 2021).

Despite substantial research on omnichannel consumer movement, limited attention has been paid to platform switching among competing digital platforms within a single shopping journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Van Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). This gap is compounded by the fact that product characteristics such as perceived risk, information requirements, and evaluation complexity may influence how consumers evaluate products, yet little is known about whether product categories elicit distinct switching patterns within digital ecosystems (Islam,

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2021). Finally, the adaptation of international students to Chinese digital commerce remains underexplored, particularly regarding how language proficiency and length of residency in China shape their confidence in using local shopping platforms (Kondo & Okubo, 2022; Siyal *et al.*, 2021). To address these gaps, this study investigates how international students navigate China's digital commerce ecosystem through multi-platform shopping journeys. Specifically, this study examines platform selection across different shopping stages, differences in switching behavior across product categories, reasons behind platform selection and switching decisions, and adaptation-related factors influencing confidence in using Chinese shopping platforms.

Based on these objectives, this study proposes three hypotheses. First, product categories influence platform-switching due to varying information and evaluation needs. Second, Chinese-language ability boosts platform confidence by easing information processing, seller communication, and transactions. Third, longer residence in China strengthens platform confidence through accumulated exposure and hands-on experience. Accordingly, this study makes three contributions to digital commerce research: it extends omnichannel and customer journey literature by examining how consumers combine multiple digital platforms across shopping stages; it advances platform-switching research by framing switching as strategic behavior rather than merely a response to dissatisfaction; and it enriches international consumer research by illuminating how foreign students adapt to China's mature digital commerce ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Shopping Journeys and Platform Switching

The development of digital commerce has transformed consumer decision-making from a linear purchasing process into a dynamic journey involving multiple digital touchpoints. Previous omnichannel research demonstrates that consumers increasingly combine different channels during product discovery, information search, evaluation, and purchase completion according to their specific needs and the advantages provided by each channel (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef *et al.*, 2021). Consumers may strategically move between channels to obtain better information, convenience, price advantages, and transaction benefits (Van Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023). With the expansion of platform-based commerce, this behavior has extended from traditional channel switching to switching among competing digital platforms. Different platforms provide differentiated functions within the shopping journey. Some platforms emphasize price competition and product variety, while others provide stronger information resources, social interaction, or transaction reliability (Gawer, 2022; Hajli, 2015; Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023). Therefore, platform switching should not always be interpreted as dissatisfaction or abandonment; instead, it may represent a purposeful strategy through

which consumers combine multiple platforms to achieve better shopping outcomes. However, previous switching research has mainly focused on customer departure caused by dissatisfaction, service failure, or alternative attractiveness (Bansal *et al.*, 2005; Keaveney, 1995). Less attention has been given to purposeful switching among multiple platforms within the same shopping journey, particularly in emerging digital ecosystems of China (Van Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023). Therefore, examining how consumers move across platforms provides a deeper understanding of contemporary digital shopping behavior.

Product Category Differences and Platform Switching

Consumer decision-making processes vary across product categories because products differ in perceived risk, information requirements, involvement level, and evaluation complexity. Products requiring greater comparison and quality evaluation may encourage consumers to search across multiple sources, whereas routine purchases may emphasize convenience and efficiency. Previous multichannel research suggests that product characteristics influence how consumers allocate activities among different channels (Islam, 2021; Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023). For example, consumers may use information-rich platforms for product comparison while selecting transaction-oriented platforms for final purchase completion (Van Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Wolf & Steul-Fischer, 2023). Therefore, different product categories may generate different platform switching patterns because consumers face different information and evaluation requirements. Based on this reasoning, this study proposes: H1: Platform switching behavior differs across product categories

International Consumer Adaptation in China's Digital Commerce Environment

International students in China represent a unique consumer group because they must adapt to an unfamiliar digital shopping environment. Compared with domestic consumers, international users may encounter additional barriers related to language, platform interfaces, payment systems, seller communication, and trust formation. Technology acceptance research suggests that perceived ease of use, familiarity, and effort expectancy are important factors affecting technology adoption and continued usage. In the context of Chinese e-commerce platforms, Chinese-language ability may influence consumers' ability to understand product descriptions, interpret reviews, communicate with sellers, and solve transaction-related problems. Therefore, stronger language ability may improve consumers' confidence when navigating Chinese digital shopping platforms (Hanif *et al.*, 2022; Siyal *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, H2: Chinese-language ability is positively associated with confidence in using China-based shopping platforms.

Residence Duration and Digital Marketplace Adaptation

Adaptation to a foreign digital marketplace is a gradual process involving learning, experience accumulation, and adjustment to local consumption practices. Longer exposure to the host environment provides consumers with more opportunities to become familiar with local platforms, payment systems, delivery processes, and purchasing procedures. Previous research indicates that repeated interaction with technologies and environments increases familiarity and reduces uncertainty. For international students, longer residence duration in China may therefore facilitate greater understanding of local e-commerce practices and improve confidence in using Chinese shopping platforms (Siyal *et al.*, 2021). Thus: H3: Residence duration in China is positively associated with confidence in using China-based shopping platforms.

Trust and Information Quality in Platform Evaluation

Trust and information quality are important factors in online purchasing because consumers cannot directly inspect products before purchase (Hajli *et al.*, 2017). Previous studies show that trust reduces perceived uncertainty and influences online transaction decisions. Product information quality, reviews, authenticity assurance, and seller credibility are particularly important in digital marketplaces where consumers rely on platform-provided information. For international consumers, these factors may become even more important because unfamiliarity with local platforms increases perceived risk (Alzaidi & Agag, 2022; Hanif *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, understanding platform choice requires consideration of not only economic benefits but also trust-building and information-related mechanisms.

This study develops a framework explaining platform switching behavior and digital adaptation among international students in China. The framework integrates product-related factors and individual adaptation factors to examine how consumers navigate China's digital commerce environment. Based on the literature review and hypothesis development, Figure 1 presents the research framework of this study. The framework illustrates the proposed relationships between product category and platform switching behavior, as well as the relationships of Chinese-language ability and residence duration in China with platform-use confidence.

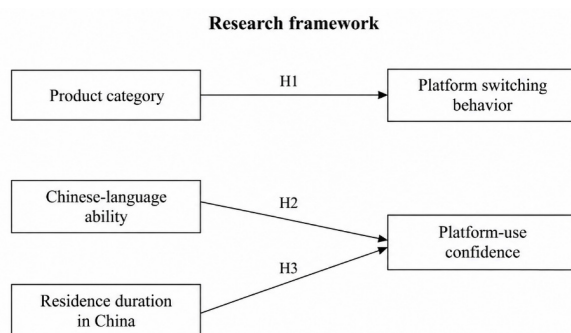


Figure 1: Conceptual research framework and hypothesized relationships

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine how product category influences platform choice and switching behavior in the shopping journeys of international students in China. A cross-sectional survey design was employed to capture respondents' current digital shopping behaviors, platform preferences, and adaptation experiences within China's rapidly developing e-commerce ecosystem. Based on the omnichannel consumer journey perspective, this study conceptualizes digital shopping as a multi-stage process consisting of product discovery, product evaluation, and final purchase. Previous omnichannel research emphasizes that consumers increasingly interact with multiple channels and touchpoints throughout the purchase journey rather than following a single-channel pathway (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, examining platform usage across different stages allows this research to identify whether consumers remain on the same platform or strategically switch between platforms according to their shopping objectives. A structured questionnaire was developed based on previous research related to omnichannel consumer behavior, digital platform usage, online shopping adoption, and switching behavior (Van Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003). The questionnaire was designed to capture international students' shopping behaviors, product-category purchasing patterns, platform selection across shopping stages, switching decisions, platform-choice considerations, and adaptation experiences within China's digital commerce environment.

Data collection and sample

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed among international students living in different cities across China. The target population was selected because international students represent consumers who must adapt to a highly localized digital commerce environment involving unfamiliar platforms, payment systems, language conditions, and consumption practices (Islam, 2021; Siyal *et al.*, 2021). A total of 90 valid responses were obtained from international students with experience using Chinese digital shopping platforms. The sample included respondents with different demographic backgrounds, residence durations in China, and levels of Chinese-language ability, allowing examination of how international consumers adapt to China's platform-based shopping environment. The use of survey data is consistent with previous empirical research investigating consumer behavior, omnichannel shopping patterns, and technology adoption, where questionnaires are widely applied to measure consumers' reported behaviors, preferences, and experiences (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2003).



Figure 2: The provinces representing the respondents' present residence in China.

Questionnaire Development and Variable Measurement

The questionnaire consisted of several sections designed to capture respondents' demographic characteristics, online shopping behaviors, platform usage patterns, shopping journey activities, platform-choice considerations, and adaptation experiences within China's digital commerce environment. The first section collected demographic information, including age, gender, nationality, educational background, residence duration in China, and Chinese-language ability. The second section examined online shopping behavior, including frequently used digital platforms and purchased product categories. The product categories analyzed included daily necessities, clothing/fashion, beauty and personal-care products, electronics/digital products, food/groceries, and branded or specialty products. The third section focused on shopping journey behavior by measuring the platforms used during product discovery, evaluation, and final purchase stages. This structure follows the customer journey perspective, which emphasizes that consumers may interact with multiple digital touchpoints throughout the decision-making process rather than relying on a single platform (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015).

This study primarily examines observable consumer shopping behaviors rather than developing latent psychological constructs. Therefore, the main variables, including product category, platform selection, and platform switching behavior, were measured using

categorical indicators that directly capture respondents' reported shopping activities. These variables represent actual behavioral outcomes and were not treated as reflective multi-item scales requiring construct validation. The questionnaire also examined factors influencing platform choice and switching, including price, convenience, trust, product availability, reviews, authenticity, and service-related factors. These factors were measured as individual decision attributes to explore their relative importance in platform selection. This approach is consistent with previous online shopping research emphasizing the roles of trust, perceived risk, information quality, and convenience in digital purchasing decisions (Neslin *et al.*, 2006). Measurement items for adaptation-related variables were adapted from previous technology acceptance and digital adoption studies, while behavioral variables such as product category and platform switching were directly measured based on respondents' reported shopping activities. For adaptation-related variables, Chinese-language ability and platform confidence were measured using self-reported ordinal scales because the study focuses on respondents' perceived ability and confidence in navigating Chinese digital shopping platforms. Since product category, platform switching, and residence duration represent observable behavioral or demographic characteristics, they were measured through direct categorical questions rather than reflective multi-item scales.

Table 1: Operationalization of Main Study Variables

Variable	Measurement	Scale type	Measurement basis
Product category	Recent purchased category	Nominal	Behavioral survey item
Platform switching	Changed platform between stages	Binary	Behavioral survey item
Chinese language ability	Self-rated ability level	Ordinal	Adapted from technology adaptation literature
Residence duration	Time living in China	Ordinal	Demographic measure
Platform confidence	Confidence using Chinese shopping platforms	Ordinal	Adapted from technology acceptance literature

The operationalization of variables reflects the behavioral focus of this study. Product category and platform switching represent direct observations of shopping activities, whereas Chinese-language ability, residence duration, and platform confidence represent individual adaptation-related characteristics. Therefore, these variables were analyzed using statistical methods appropriate for categorical and ordinal data.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical approaches. The analyses were conducted using statistical software to ensure systematic calculation and interpretation of the result. First, frequency and percentage analyses were conducted to summarize respondent characteristics, platform usage patterns, product-category purchasing behavior, and major factors affecting platform decisions. Second, hypothesis-based statistical analyses were conducted to examine relationships among the main research variables. Since the study focuses primarily on categorical and ordinal variables, statistical methods appropriate for these measurement levels were applied. To test H1, a chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between product category and platform

switching behavior. The chi-square test of independence was applied to examine the association between product category and platform switching behavior. The suitability of the test was considered based on category frequencies and expected cell counts. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used to determine statistical significance. This method is widely used for identifying associations between categorical variables in consumer behavior research. To test H2 and H3, Spearman's rank correlation analysis was employed to examine the monotonic relationships between Chinese-language ability, residence duration, and confidence in using China-based shopping platforms. Spearman correlation is suitable for ordinal variables because it does not require normally distributed continuous measurements. Platform confidence was measured using a self-rated ordinal scale ranging from lower to higher confidence levels. Additional comparative and descriptive analyses were performed to identify platform preferences across shopping stages, category-specific platform strategies, decision factors, and adaptation patterns. The findings are presented through figures and tables illustrating platform usage, shopping journey transitions, switching behavior, decision considerations, and international student adaptation outcomes.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics and online shopping profile of respondents.

Variable	Category	% of consumers
Gender	Male	84.4%
	Female	15.6%
Age group	18–20	7.8%
	21–24	20.0%
	25–29	44.4%
	30–34	16.7%
	35 or older	8.9%
	Prefer not to say	2.2%
Study level	Bachelor's	24.4%
	Master's	41.1%
	Doctoral / Ph.D.	33.3%
	Language / non-degree program	1.1%
Time lived in China	Less than 6 months	6.7%
	6–12 months	15.6%
	More than 1 year to 2 years	15.6%
	More than 2 years to 3 years	26.7%
	More than 3 years	35.6%
Chinese-language ability	Very limited	10.0%
	Limited	20.0%
	Moderate	30.0%
	Good	30.0%
	Very good / fluent	10.0%

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent characteristics and online shopping profile

The demographic characteristics and online shopping profiles of the 90 international student respondents are presented in Tables 2 and 3. The sample mainly consisted of postgraduate students, with master's students representing 41.1% and doctoral students representing 33.3% of participants. This composition provides an appropriate context for examining digital shopping behavior because postgraduate international students generally have greater independence in consumption decisions and longer exposure to China's digital commerce environment. Respondents also showed considerable variation in their adaptation background. More than 60% of participants had lived in China for over two years, indicating substantial exposure to local consumption practices and digital shopping platforms. Chinese-language ability was distributed across different proficiency levels, with most respondents reporting moderate or good ability. This variation provides an appropriate basis for subsequent analysis of how language capability and residence experience relate to confidence

in using China-based shopping platforms.

The respondents demonstrated active engagement with online shopping platforms (Table 2). Monthly online shopping expenditure was concentrated mainly within the RMB 500–999 range (55.6%), while 60% of respondents reported purchasing online at least several times per month. Furthermore, 80% indicated that their consumption behavior was either almost entirely online or more online than offline, confirming that the sample represents digitally engaged consumers with sufficient experience of China's platform-based shopping environment.

Overall, the sample represents international students with diverse levels of digital shopping experience, language ability, and adaptation to China's digital commerce ecosystem. This diversity provides an appropriate foundation for examining platform usage patterns, shopping journey transitions, switching behavior, and adaptation-related factors in subsequent analyses.

Platform usage and product purchasing patterns

The platforms and channels used by international student respondents during the previous three months

Table 3: The online shopping expenditure and purchase frequency profile of respondents.

Variable	Category	% of consumers
Monthly shopping spends	Less than RMB 500	21.1%
	RMB 500–999	55.6%
	RMB 3,000–4,999	10.0%
	RMB 5,000 or more	1.1%
	Prefer not to say	12.2%
Online purchase frequency	Less than once a month	7.8%
	1–3 times per month	33.3%
	About once a week	26.7%
	2–3 times per week	14.4%
Online/offline orientation	Almost entirely online	38.9%
	More online than offline	41.1%
	About equally online and offline	11.1%
	More offline than online	6.7%
	Almost entirely offline	2.2%

are presented in Figure 3. The results demonstrate a high level of engagement with domestic digital commerce platforms, with Pinduoduo being the most frequently used platform (86.7%), followed by Taobao/Tmall (77.8%). Other major channels included Meituan (57.8%), WeChat (38.9%), and JD (32.2%). In comparison, social commerce and specialized platforms, including Douyin/TikTok (16.7%), Xiaohongshu/RedNote (4.4%), and Dewu/POIZON (4.4%), showed relatively lower usage rates. Physical retail remained relevant, with 24.4% of respondents reporting its use during the same period.

Further, the product categories purchased by respondents are shown in Figure 4. Clothing/fashion (82.2%) and daily necessities (81.1%) represented the most frequently

purchased categories, followed by food/groceries (75.6%) and electronics/digital products (55.6%). Beauty/personal care products accounted for 37.8% of reported purchases, while no respondents reported purchases in the branded/specialty category during the survey period. Overall, the results show that respondents actively engage with multiple Chinese shopping channels, while purchasing activities are concentrated in frequently consumed product categories. The observed variation in platform usage and product purchasing patterns provides the basis for further examining whether product category characteristics influence platform selection and switching behavior throughout the shopping journey.

Product category and platform choice across shopping stages

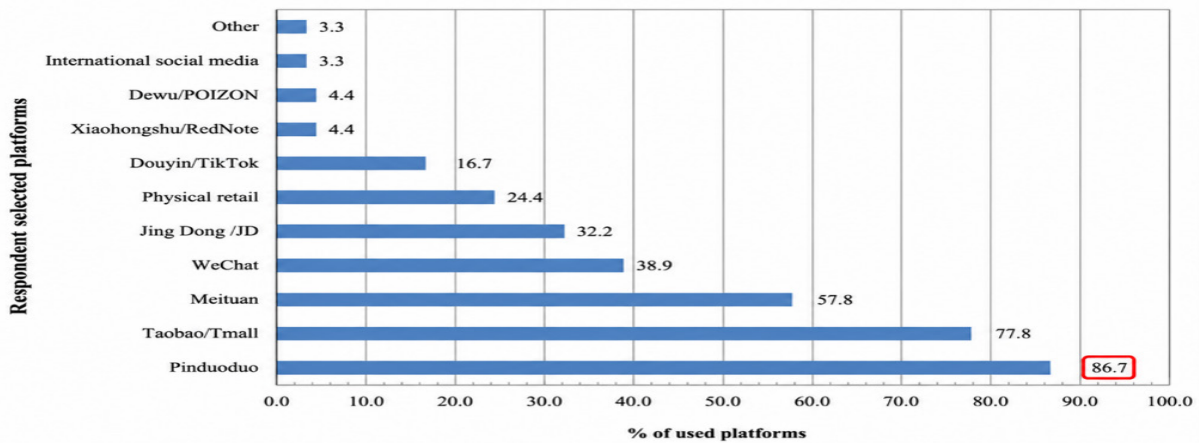


Figure 3: Shopping platforms and channels used by respondents during the previous three months.

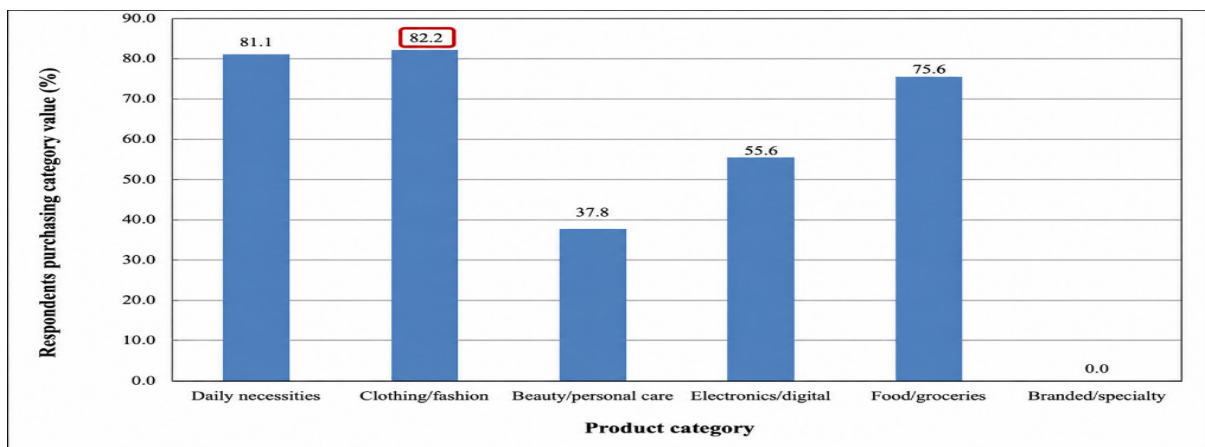


Figure 4: Product categories purchased by respondents during the previous three months.

The platform preferences across different product categories during the evaluation and final purchase stages are presented in Figure 5. The results indicate that platform selection varied across product categories and shopping stages, suggesting that respondents did not rely on a uniform platform selection pattern throughout their shopping activities. During the evaluation stage (Figure 5a), Pinduoduo showed the highest usage for daily necessities and food/groceries, whereas Taobao/Tmall was more frequently selected for clothing/fashion, beauty/personal-care products, electronics/digital products, and branded/specialty products. JD also showed a relatively stronger

role in electronics/digital product evaluation, while Meituan demonstrated notable usage for food/grocery-related evaluation.

During the final purchase stage (Figure 5b), platform preferences remained category-specific. Pinduoduo continued to show higher usage for daily necessities and food/grocery purchases, whereas Taobao/Tmall maintained stronger positions in clothing/fashion, beauty/personal-care products, and branded/specialty products. For electronics/digital products, JD showed a relatively stronger purchasing role compared with other platforms. Comparing the evaluation and purchase stages reveals

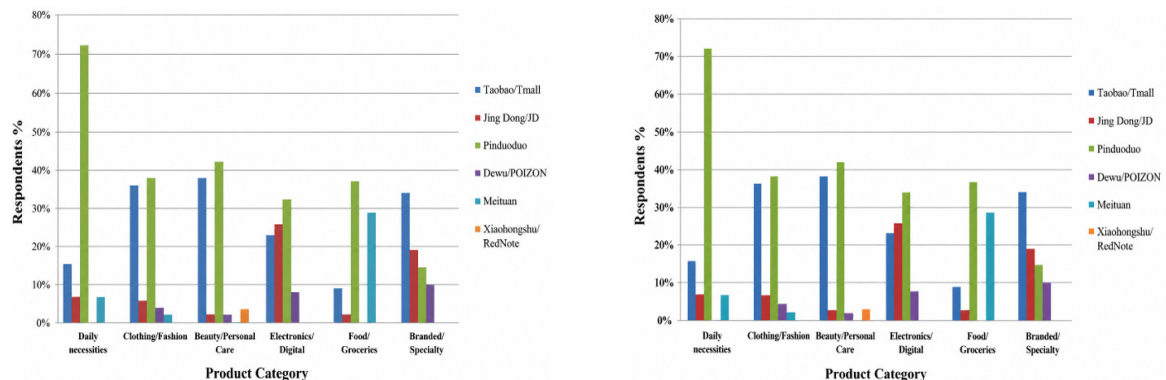


Figure 5: Platform choice by product category across shopping stages. (a) Platform used for product evaluation. (b) Platform used for final purchase.

that platform choices were not completely consistent across the shopping process. Respondents frequently used different platforms at different stages, indicating the presence of multi-platform shopping journeys in which consumers combine the functional advantages of multiple digital platforms.

Platform switching across product categories

Figure 6 presents the proportion of respondents who switched platforms between the product evaluation and final purchase stages across different product

categories. The results indicate that platform switching was a common behavior among international student consumers, although the intensity of switching varied across product categories. Daily necessities showed the highest switching rate (47.9%), followed closely by beauty/personal care products (47.1%) and electronics/digital products (42.0%). Clothing/fashion products recorded a moderate switching rate of 37.8%, while food/groceries and branded/specialty products showed relatively lower switching rates of 35.3% and 33.3%, respectively. The findings demonstrate that switching behavior was

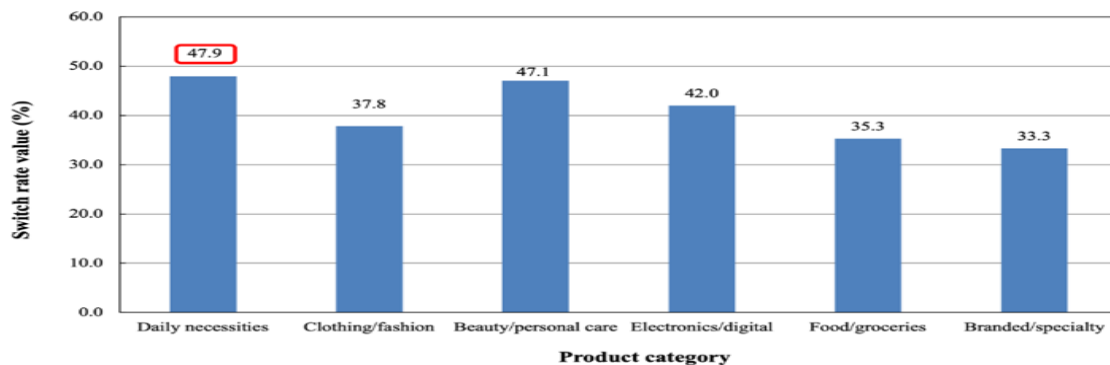


Figure 6. Evaluation-to-purchase platform switching rates by product category.

not uniform across categories. Instead, the likelihood of moving from one platform during product evaluation to another platform for final purchase differed depending on the product category. These results further support the observation from Figure 5 that platform choice changes across shopping stages and product types.

Shopping journey transitions across discovery, evaluation, and purchase stages

The platform transitions of international student respondents throughout the shopping journey are illustrated in Figure 7, covering three sequential stages: discovery, evaluation, and final purchase. The Sankey diagram demonstrates that respondents frequently moved across platforms rather than following a single-platform pathway throughout the entire purchasing process. At the discovery stage, Pinduoduo was the most frequently selected platform (n = 41), followed by Taobao/

Tmall (n = 19) and JD (n = 8). During the evaluation stage, Pinduoduo remained the most frequently used platform (n = 39), while Taobao/Tmall (n = 20), JD (n = 8), and other channels (n = 11) also contributed to product evaluation activities. At the final purchase stage, Pinduoduo continued to represent the largest purchase destination (n = 42), followed by Taobao/Tmall (n = 16), JD (n = 9), and Meituan (n = 6).

Although some respondents remained on the same platform across different stages, the transition flows reveal substantial cross-platform movement. For example, respondents who discovered products through Taobao/Tmall, JD, Douyin/TikTok, and other channels frequently transitioned to different platforms for evaluation or purchase. Meanwhile, Pinduoduo retained a large user base while also exchanging users with other platforms throughout the shopping process.

Overall, the Sankey analysis demonstrates that



Figure 7: Platform transitions across the recent-purchase journey: discovery, evaluation, and purchase.

international students engage in multi-platform shopping journeys, where discovery, evaluation, and purchase activities may occur across different digital platforms. These transition patterns indicate that platform selection is stage-dependent rather than fixed, reflecting the dynamic nature of digital shopping journeys.

Figure 8 presents self-reported platform retention and switching behavior across different product categories. The results indicate that switching and retention patterns varied across categories, suggesting that respondents' platform usage continuity differed depending on the type

of product purchased. Beauty/personal care products showed the highest observed switching rate, with 62.5% of respondents reporting platform changes during the shopping process. Daily necessities and other non-food products also demonstrated relatively high switching rates, with 50.0% of respondents indicating platform changes. Clothing/fashion products showed a moderate switching rate of 30.8%, whereas electronics/digital products exhibited lower switching behavior, with 23.1% of respondents reporting platform changes.

In contrast, branded/specialty products showed

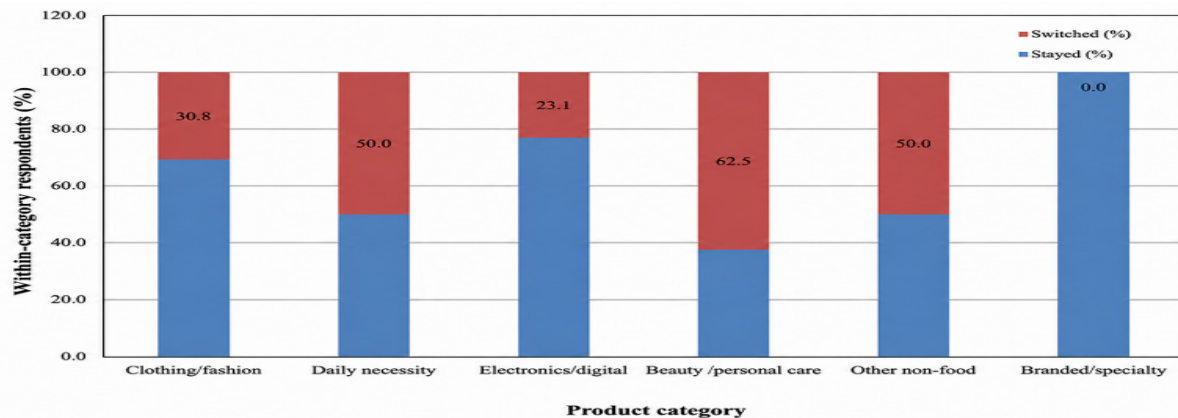


Figure 8: Platform retention and switching by recent product category.

complete platform retention among respondents, with all consumers remaining on the same platform throughout the shopping process. Overall, the findings demonstrate that platform switching was not consistent across product categories, with some categories characterized by greater platform movement while others showed stronger platform continuity.

Factors Associated with Platform Selection and Switching Decisions

The factors associated with final platform selection and platform switching decisions are presented in Figure 9. The results indicate that respondents considered different

factors when selecting a final purchase platform and when deciding to change platforms during the shopping journey. For final platform selection (Figure 9a), price/deal was the most frequently reported factor, accounting for 35.6% of responses. Trust and availability/quality were the next most frequently mentioned factors, representing 15.6% and 14.4% of responses, respectively. Information/inspiration also appeared frequently (14.4%), followed by authenticity (8.9%). Other factors, including convenience/payment, physical inspection, social recommendations, after-sales service, and delivery/logistics, were reported less frequently.

Regarding platform switching motivations (Figure 9b),

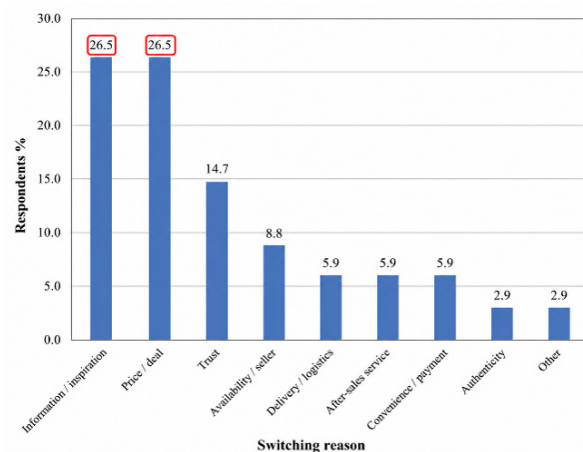
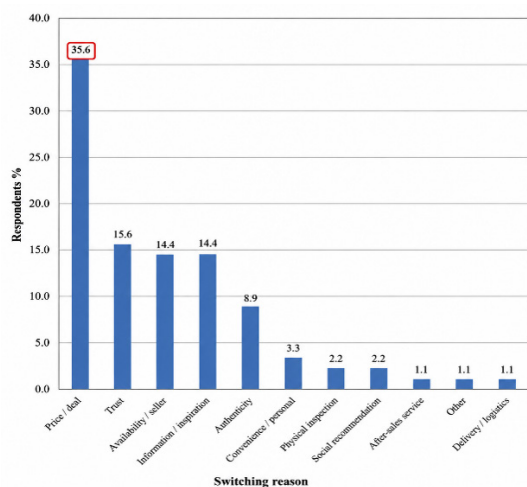


Figure 9: Factors associated with platform selection and switching. (a) Reasons for final platform selection. (b) Reasons for switching platforms.

information/inspiration and price/deal were the two most frequently reported reasons, both accounting for 26.5% of responses. Trust represented another major switching consideration (14.7%), followed by availability/seller-related factors (8.8%). Delivery/logistics, after-sales service, and convenience/payment each accounted for 5.9%, while authenticity and other factors represented smaller proportions. Comparing the two decision contexts, price/deal remained an important consideration for both final platform selection and switching decisions, whereas information-related factors appeared particularly relevant in motivating platform changes. These findings suggest that platform decisions involve multiple considerations, including economic value, information availability, and trust-related factors.

Beyond the reported reasons for platform selection and switching, respondents also evaluated the relative importance of different platform attributes when making

final purchase decisions (Figure 10). The results show that service assurance and product credibility were the most highly valued considerations. Return/refund/after-sales service received the highest mean importance score (4.0), followed by authenticity/genuine-product assurance, quality of reviews/product information, and convenience/ease of use/payment, each with a mean score of 3.8. Trust in the platform also received a relatively high score (3.7), while delivery speed and reliability obtained a mean score of 3.6. In comparison, price/value for money (3.4), product variety/availability (3.3), and language accessibility/ease of understanding (3.3) were considered moderately important, whereas social recommendations/influence received the lowest score (3.1). These findings indicate that final platform selection was evaluated not only based on economic benefits but also on reliability, service quality, and information credibility.

Taken together, Figures 9 and 10 suggest that platform

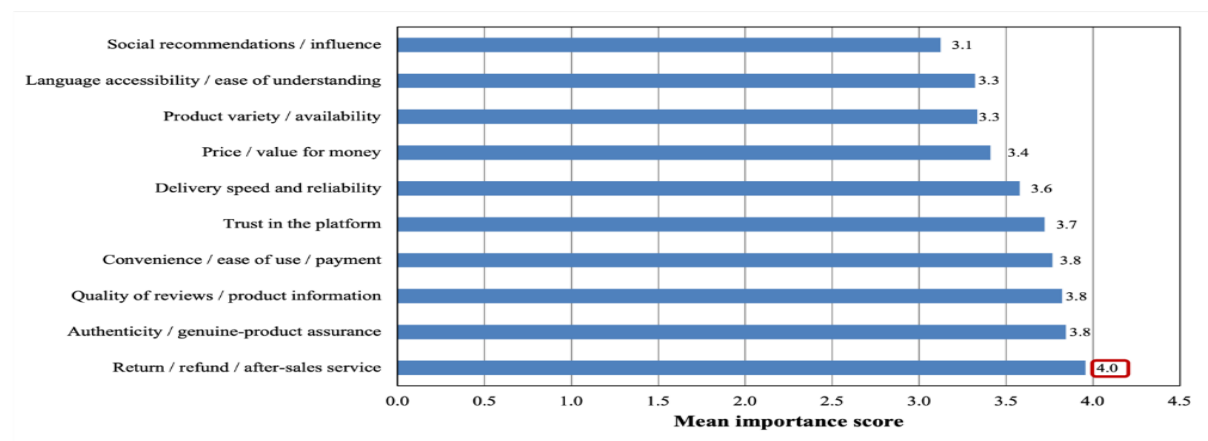


Figure 10: Mean importance of factors influencing final platform choice.

decisions involve multiple considerations. While price and information availability may encourage platform selection or switching, final platform retention appears to depend more strongly on trust, authenticity, service assurance, and information quality.

Adaptation to Chinese digital shopping platforms

Respondents' confidence in using Chinese shopping platforms according to residence duration in China and Chinese-language ability is presented in Figure 11. The results show clear differences in platform-use confidence

across different levels of exposure and language proficiency. As shown in Figure 11a, mean confidence increased progressively with longer residence duration in China. Respondents who had lived in China for less than six months reported the lowest confidence level, whereas those with more than three years of residence showed the highest confidence. Intermediate residence groups demonstrated gradually higher confidence as exposure to the Chinese digital shopping environment increased.

Figure 11b further illustrates differences in platform-use

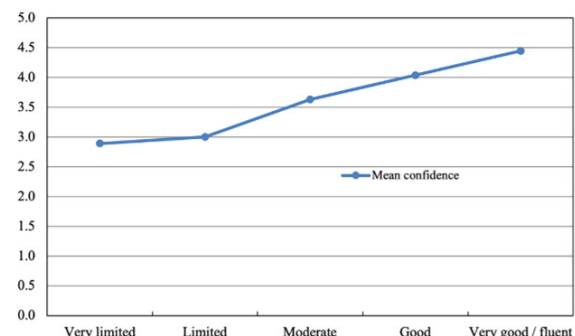
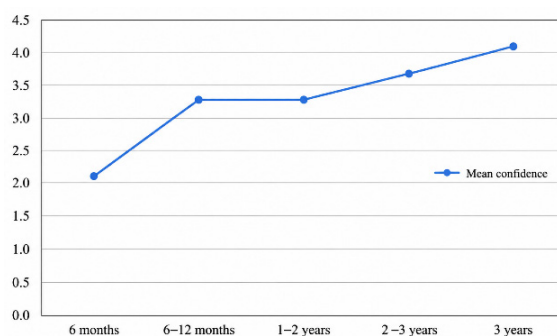


Figure 11: Platform-use confidence across adaptation characteristics. (a) Confidence by duration of residence in China. (b) Confidence by Chinese-language ability.

confidence across Chinese-language proficiency levels. Respondents with very limited or limited Chinese ability reported relatively lower confidence, while confidence increased consistently among respondents with moderate, good, and very good/fluently language ability. The highest confidence level was observed among respondents with very good/fluently Chinese proficiency. Overall, the findings indicate that familiarity with Chinese shopping platforms varies according to both linguistic ability and length of exposure to the local digital commerce environment.

Platform adaptation and remaining barriers

Changes in respondents' use of China-based shopping platforms and the difficulties they encountered during platform usage are presented in Figures 12 and 13. The results indicate that most respondents increased their engagement with Chinese shopping platforms as they became more familiar with the digital shopping environment. As shown in Figure 12, 34.4% of respondents reported a substantial increase in platform usage, followed by high adaptation (22.2%) and moderate increases (22.2%). A

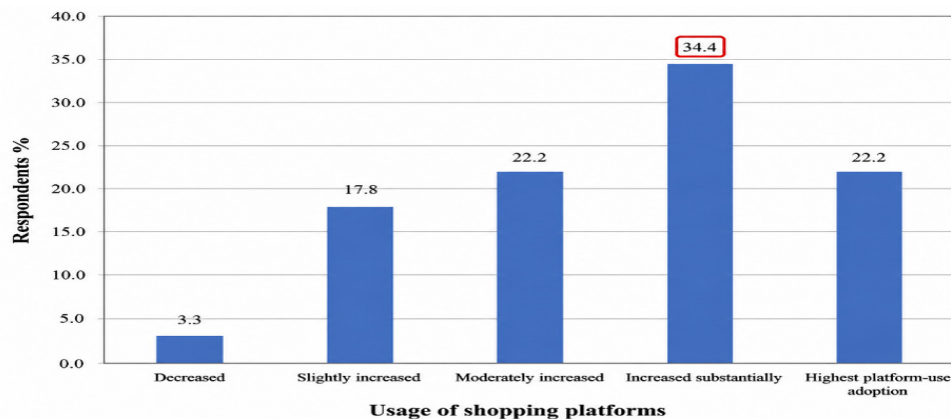


Figure 12: Adaptation to Chinese shopping platforms and remaining usage barriers. Change in use of China-based shopping platforms.

smaller proportion reported slight increases (17.8%), while only 3.3% indicated decreased usage. Despite increased platform engagement, respondents continued to experience several barriers when using Chinese shopping platforms (Figure 13). Language difficulty was the most frequently reported challenge (48.9%), followed by concerns regarding product authenticity (33.3%) and difficulties in trusting sellers (24.4%) and difficulties in trusting sellers

or stores (24.4%). Additional barriers included app features (14.4%), customer service and after-sales service (12.2% each), product suitability (11.1%), and product information accessibility (10.0%). Only 8.9% of respondents reported no major difficulties. Overall, the findings suggest that respondents generally increased their adoption of Chinese shopping platforms; however, adaptation remained incomplete, with language

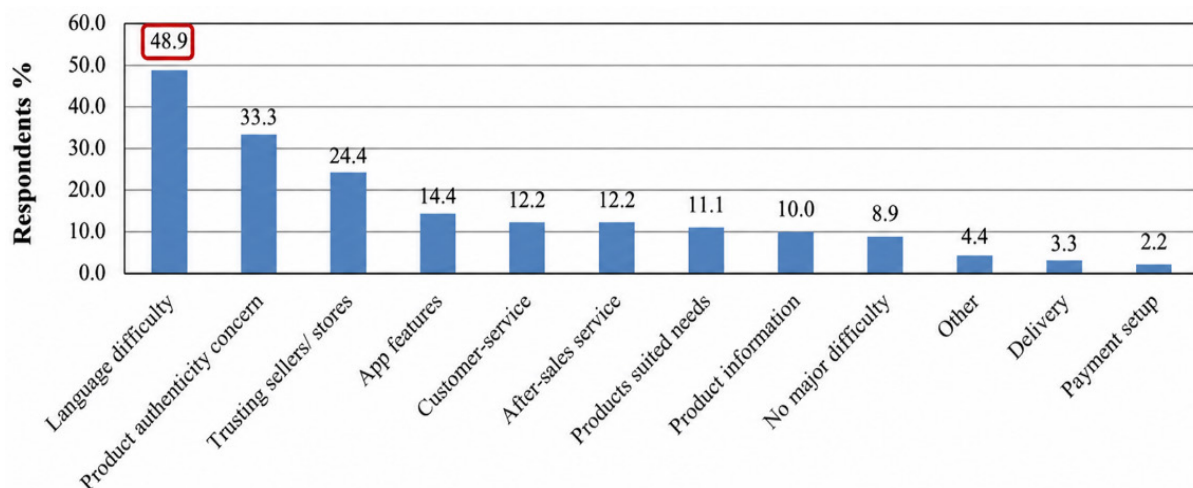


Figure 13: Current difficulties encountered on Chinese shopping platforms.

barriers, authenticity concerns, and trust-related issues continuing to influence their shopping experiences.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Following the descriptive analysis of platform usage patterns, shopping journey transitions, switching behavior, and

adaptation characteristics, hypothesis testing was conducted to examine the proposed relationships. Table 4 summarizes the statistical methods and outcomes for the three hypotheses.

Product category and platform switching behavior

To examine whether platform switching behavior differed

Table 4: Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Statistical Method	Result	Interpretation
H1	Product category → Platform switching behavior	Chi-square test of independence χ^2 ($\chi^2=6.445$, $p=0.265$)	Not supported	No significant association
H2	Chinese-language ability → Platform-use confidence	Spearman correlation ($\rho=0.499$, $p < 0.001$)	Supported	Moderate positive relationship
H3	Residence duration → Platform-use confidence	Spearman correlation ($\rho=0.459$, $p < 0.001$)	Supported	Moderate positive relationship

significantly across product categories, a chi-square test of independence was conducted. Although descriptive results showed variation in switching rates among product categories, the statistical test did not identify a significant association between product category and switching behavior ($\chi^2 = 6.445$, $p = 0.265$). Therefore, H1 was not supported.

Chinese-language Ability and Platform-use Confidence

The relationship between Chinese-language ability and confidence in using Chinese shopping platforms was examined using Spearman's rank correlation analysis. The results revealed a significant positive association between language ability and platform-use confidence ($\rho = 0.499$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents with stronger Chinese-language ability tended to report higher confidence when navigating Chinese digital shopping platforms. Therefore, H2 was supported.

H3: Residence Duration and Platform-use Confidence

The association between residence duration in China and platform-use confidence was examined using Spearman's rank correlation analysis. The results showed a significant positive relationship between residence duration and confidence in using Chinese shopping platforms ($\rho = 0.459$, $p < 0.001$). Longer exposure to the Chinese digital shopping environment was associated with greater confidence among respondents. Therefore, H3 was supported. Overall, the hypothesis testing results indicate that adaptation-related factors, including Chinese-language ability and residence duration, were significantly associated with platform-use confidence, whereas product category was not statistically associated with switching behavior. These findings suggest that individual adaptation factors may play a stronger role in shaping confidence within the Chinese digital shopping environment.

Discussion

Multi-platform Shopping Journeys and Dynamic Platform Switching

This study provides evidence that international students in China do not follow a single-platform shopping journey but instead engage in dynamic multi-platform behaviors across different stages of the purchasing process. Previous omnichannel research has mainly examined

consumer movement between online and offline channels or the integration of multiple retail touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). Extending this perspective, the present study demonstrates that platform transitions also occur within digital ecosystems, where competing e-commerce platforms serve different roles throughout the shopping journey (De Keyser *et al.*, 2020; Gensler *et al.*, 2012; Kuehn *et al.*, 2019; Tueanrat *et al.*, 2021). The findings should be interpreted considering the relatively limited sample size and the specific population of international students in China. The findings show that respondents frequently used different platforms for product discovery, evaluation, and final purchase rather than remaining within one platform from beginning to end. This suggests that platform selection is not necessarily based on overall platform preference but on the perceived suitability of each platform for specific shopping tasks. For example, one platform may provide richer product information or broader comparison opportunities, while another may offer more attractive prices, stronger trust perceptions, or better transaction convenience. Therefore, international students actively construct their own shopping journeys by combining the advantages of multiple platforms.

This finding contributes to digital commerce research by shifting attention from platform loyalty toward platform utilization. Traditional platform research often emphasizes retention, continuous usage, and customer loyalty. However, the present study suggests that in highly competitive digital marketplaces, consumers may not develop exclusive relationships with a single platform. Instead, they strategically allocate different activities among platforms according to their immediate needs. Such behavior reflects a more flexible understanding of digital consumption, where consumers continuously evaluate available options throughout the decision-making process (Kuehn *et al.*, 2019; Tueanrat *et al.*, 2021).

Product Category Differences and the Complexity of Platform Switching Behavior

The findings reveal that platform switching patterns varied across product categories. Beauty and personal care products showed relatively higher switching rates, while electronics and branded products demonstrated stronger platform retention. These descriptive differences suggest that product characteristics may influence how consumers evaluate and compare platforms during shopping activities (Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013; Venkatesan *et al.*,

2007). However, the hypothesis testing results provide a more cautious interpretation. Although differences in switching rates were observed among categories, the chi-square test did not identify a statistically significant relationship between product category and switching behavior. Therefore, product category alone cannot be considered a sufficient explanation for platform switching among international students. This finding is theoretically meaningful because it indicates that switching behavior may be influenced by a combination of contextual and individual factors rather than by product category alone. Product characteristics may create different shopping requirements, but consumers' final decisions may also depend on familiarity with platforms, trust perceptions, previous experience, and perceived transaction risks (Hsieh *et al.*, 2012; Pavlou, 2003). In other words, category differences provide an important context for understanding shopping behavior, but they do not fully determine whether consumers switch platforms.

This result also contributes to switching behavior literature. Previous studies have often associated switching with dissatisfaction, service failure, or negative experiences. In contrast, the present study suggests that switching in digital marketplaces can occur even without dissatisfaction. Consumers may switch because they are searching for better information, more competitive prices, stronger authenticity assurance, or greater confidence before completing a purchase. Therefore, platform switching should be understood as an adaptive decision process rather than simply a signal of customer loss (Hsieh *et al.*, 2012).

Platform Choice Mechanisms: Price, Information, Trust, and Service Quality

The study further demonstrates that platform selection and switching decisions are influenced by multiple considerations, including economic value, information availability, trust, authenticity, and service-related factors. This finding supports previous research emphasizing the importance of perceived value, trust, and information quality in online purchasing decisions (Gefen *et al.*, 2003; Pavlou, 2003). Price-related benefits remained an important factor in respondents' platform decisions, indicating that economic considerations continue to play a central role in digital shopping. However, the findings also show that consumers evaluate platforms beyond price. Factors such as authenticity assurance, reviews, product information, and after-sales service were highly valued when respondents assessed final platform choices. This is particularly relevant for international students, who often purchase products in an unfamiliar digital environment. Unlike domestic consumers who may already possess knowledge of local platforms and sellers, international users may face greater uncertainty regarding product quality, seller reliability, and transaction procedures. As a result, trust-building mechanisms become especially important. Clear product information, reliable reviews, authenticity guarantees, and effective

customer service can reduce uncertainty and increase confidence in platform usage (Gefen *et al.*, 2003; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Park *et al.*, 2007).

The findings also extend understanding of switching behavior. Platform changes do not necessarily represent dissatisfaction with the original platform. Instead, consumers may compare different platforms and move between them to optimize shopping outcomes. In multi-platform environments, competitive advantage depends not only on attracting users but also on providing value at different stages of the consumer journey (Hsieh *et al.*, 2012; Venkatesan *et al.*, 2007).

Digital Adaptation of International Students in Chinese E-commerce Environments

The findings demonstrate that platform-use confidence varies according to both Chinese-language ability and residence duration in China. The hypothesis testing results further confirm these relationships, showing significant positive associations between language ability, residence duration, and confidence in using Chinese shopping platforms. These findings extend technology adoption research. Previous studies have emphasized factors such as perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and familiarity as important determinants of technology engagement. The present study adds a cross-cultural perspective by showing that digital adaptation in a foreign market involves not only technological acceptance but also the ability to understand localized interfaces, interpret information, evaluate sellers, and complete transactions confidently (Davis, 1989).

Language ability appears to be an important mechanism supporting adaptation. Chinese shopping platforms often contain localized product descriptions, seller communication systems, promotional information, and customer service processes. Limited language ability may therefore create difficulties in searching, comparing products, and evaluating purchase risks. As language proficiency improves, international students may become more capable of navigating platform functions and making independent purchasing decisions. Residence duration also contributes to adaptation by increasing exposure and familiarity. Longer-term residents are likely to accumulate more experience with local platforms, payment systems, delivery processes, and shopping practices. Therefore, adaptation should be understood as a gradual process shaped by repeated interaction with the digital environment rather than an immediate outcome of platform adoption. Nevertheless, increased confidence does not eliminate all barriers. The findings show that language difficulty, authenticity concerns, and seller trust remain important challenges. This suggests that international consumers continue to experience uncertainty even after becoming familiar with Chinese e-commerce platforms (Davis, 1989; Gawer, 2022). Successful international engagement therefore requires platforms to support users throughout the adaptation process.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This study contributes to digital commerce research in several ways. First, it extends customer journey research by demonstrating that digital shopping journeys involve movement among competing platforms rather than only movement between online and offline channels. Consumers actively construct personalized journeys by assigning different functions to different platforms (Neslin *et al.*, 2006; Tueanrat *et al.*, 2021). Second, this study contributes to platform switching research by showing that switching is not necessarily a negative outcome caused by dissatisfaction. In multi-platform ecosystems, switching can represent rational consumer behavior driven by comparison, information search, trust evaluation, and value optimization (Hsieh *et al.*, 2012; Venkatesan *et al.*, 2007). Third, this research contributes to international consumer studies by highlighting digital adaptation as an ongoing process. For foreign consumers entering a localized e-commerce ecosystem, successful participation depends not only on platform functionality but also on language accessibility, information transparency, and trust-building mechanisms. From a managerial perspective, Chinese e-commerce platforms should recognize that international users may not seek a single platform solution. Instead of focusing only on customer retention, platforms should improve specific stages of the consumer journey, including search functions, product information quality, multilingual support, seller credibility, and after-sales services. Reducing adaptation barriers can improve international users' confidence and long-term engagement (Davis, 1989; De Keyser *et al.*, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study examined international students' digital shopping journeys in China, focusing on platform selection, switching behavior, and adaptation factors via survey data analyzed with descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and Spearman correlations. The findings show that international students frequently use multiple platforms throughout a single shopping journey rather than relying on one platform exclusively. Platforms offer distinct advantages across stages, prompting consumers to combine them for search, comparison, and purchase. The results suggest that platform switching is not simply a response to dissatisfaction but can also represent a strategic decision-making process through which consumers seek better information, value, and service. The study further examined whether product category influences switching behavior. Although descriptive differences were observed across product categories, hypothesis testing showed that product category was not significantly associated with platform switching. This indicates that product category alone cannot fully explain switching decisions, which are likely influenced by multiple factors, including trust, information quality, convenience, and previous experience. In addition, the

findings demonstrate that adaptation-related factors play an important role in international students' digital shopping experiences. Chinese-language ability and residence duration in China were positively associated with confidence in using Chinese shopping platforms. These results highlight that digital adaptation is a gradual process shaped by language capability and familiarity with the local e-commerce environment. This study contributes to digital commerce research by extending understanding of multi-platform shopping journeys, strategic platform switching, and international consumer adaptation.

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